Blessed, Precious Mistakes: Deconstruction, Evolution, and New Atheism in America

Introduction

The standard academic objection to the New Atheists—a group of contemporary authors who write critically about religion—is that they lack a solid understanding of religion. As Terry Eagleton writes in his review of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, the New Atheists "invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince." (Eagleton: 2006)[1] That objection is not wrong: in the work of Dawkins and his colleagues such as Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens, religion is often sampled only *in extremis* and in an unfavorable light. But in this article I want to make a different complaint: although shrouding themselves in the mantle of scientific rationality, New Atheists—especially the American New Atheist Daniel C. Dennett—also exhibit a tendentious understanding of evolutionary theory, an approach that leads them to a limited, rigid version of atheism.

My overall purpose in this article, however, is broader: I want to suggest, perhaps somewhat to his surprise, that Dennett would have seen this problem coming if he had read Jacques Derrida, the famous French philosopher who outlined a critique of the western philosophical tradition known as "deconstruction." The deconstructive approach to religion and contemporary "pluralist" approaches to evolutionary biology have, I will show here, much in common. Both approaches target a set of presuppositions that inform a particularly *American* atheist sensibility. In this American atheism, religion is presumed to be a set of propositional beliefs—a Protestant paradigm, stretching back to the intellectual moment of the country's founding, in which the world and religion are readily accessible to human reason. Mark Noll writes that one of the distinct theological innovations of American Protestantism was the notion that "[t]he physical world created by God was… understandable, progressing, and malleable." (Noll: 2002, 4) This high degree of confidence in human reason to make the world intelligible has become, ironically, the primary engine by which religion in the context of contemporary American atheism is taken apart: religion is construed as a misbegotten science in need of correction or elimination.

In this paper, I will put Dennett's bestselling 2006 book *Breaking the Spell* on the table, drawing out the ways it traffics in an unhelpful overconfidence in human reason's ability to clarify the world, and then show how a convergent critique, drawing on both pluralist evolutionary theory and deconstruction, can shed new light on the limitations of this text.[2] I will conclude by talking about how this convergence between post-adaptationist

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[1] Cf. the critiques of Dennett from a range of quarters in a special issue of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* from 2008, especially Armin Geertz, who contends, in his pointedly titled "How *Not* to Do the Cognitive Science of Religion Today," that *Breaking the Spell* is "a catastrophe if our goal is to persuade skeptics of the advantages of cognitive approaches to the study of religion—or even just introduce cognition to the curious!" (Geertz: 2008, 9)

[2] A fuller account of American New Atheism would need to spend time with Sam Harris, who also relies heavily on a scientistic frame that views religion entirely in terms of a set of propositions contained in holy books. Harris's approach lapses swiftly into a racialized, neoconservative, American supremacism that views Islam as an especial problem in the domain of human rights and as an existential threat to the

evolutionary theory and deconstruction can be used by philosophers of religion, religious pluralists, and even atheists. I propose that there is a fertile field of possibility between a deconstructive approach to religion and evolutionary theory. By jointly thematizing what I here call *accident*, these disciplines can work together to pull back the overconfidence in scientistic reason in the US cultural milieu, opening up possibilities not only for new understandings of religion, but for new, postsecular atheisms.

"This is Puzzling": Daniel C. Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*

Breaking the Spell is a complicated, uneven book, holding many insights and solid arguments, but also, I think, expressing several fundamental misunderstandings about religion and, as this article will show, evolutionary biology. Dennett finds religion and the actions of religious people "puzzling," (Dennett: 2006, 9) and his book is an attempt to pursue a "rational" solution to this puzzle. One of the most telling moments in the book, for me, comes in an early chapter, in a passage that may have made sense in 2006[3] but is a specimen of black humor in 2013. "We know," Dennett writes,

"when eclipses will occur centuries in advance; we can predict the effects on the atmosphere of adjustments in how we generate electricity; we can anticipate in broad outline what will happen as our petroleum reserves dwindle in the next decades.... We have avoided economic collapses in recent years because our economic models have shown us impending problems.... It has become something of a tradition in recent years for the meteorologists on television to hype an oncoming hurricane or other storm, and then for the public to be underwhelmed by the actual storm. But sober evaluations show that many lives are saved, destruction is minimized." (Dennett: 2006, 38)

This passage expresses Dennett's superlative confidence in human reason to clarify, predict, and control a fundamentally rationally ordered world. Religion, too, Dennett goes on, is something fundamentally *studiable*, scrutable, subject to a rational accounting. Just as we have (apparently) used reason to prevent economic disasters, "[w]e should extend the same intense scrutiny, for the same reasons, to religious phenomena," (Dennett: 2006, 38) rendering an account of religion's virtues and vices.

In addition to a breathtaking confidence in the capacities of human reason, there is a specific presupposition about religion built into this perspective. It reflects Dennett's inheritance of a certain American optimism about science as well as an American Protestant fixation on religion understood as a register of belief. In an early chapter, Dennett proposes a tentative definition of religions as "social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought." (Dennett: 2006, 9) Individuals who, like William James, understand religion as "feelings, acts, and experiences," Dennett insists, deploying a distinction that scholars of religion have long since discarded as obsolete,[4] are "spiritual, not religious." (Dennett: 2006, 11) By this

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security of the US and Israel. (Harris: 2013)

[3] Published in 2006, I suspect *Breaking the Spell* was submitted as a manuscript in spring 2005, before Hurricane Katrina hit southern Louisiana on August 29, 2005.

[4] See, for instance, Carrette & King: 2004.

logic, Dennett suggests, “a religion without *God* or *gods* is like a vertebrate without a backbone” (Dennett: 2006, 9). Dennett’s approach studiously avoids recent theoretical work on religion—especially from postcolonial theory—that seeks to assess religion outside of the Protestant framework of *sola fides.*[5] Dennett’s only attempt to authorize his framework by entering into dialog with scholars of religion comes in a nod to Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz as “two of the best-known definitions of religion.” (Dennett: 2006, 391, endnote 3)[6]

Dennett’s approach is expansionist. He goes beyond proposing a modest heuristic for understanding religion (Protestant creedal belief) to asserting that all other definitions are invalid. He accuses those who say that, for instance, experience or affect are integral to the understanding of religion of using the “Louie Armstrong Defense”: in his response to the question “What is jazz?”, Armstrong famously responded, “[i]f you have to ask, you ain't never gonna get to know.” To which Dennett admonishes: “This will not do.” (Dennett: 2006, 303) For Dennett, a non-propositional understanding of religion cannot be studied by the tools of science, and therefore *cannot be* the right approach. Dennett works out of an Americanized positivism, affirming that only that which can be formulated, tested, controlled and predicted is a valid object of study.

This conception of religion as reducible to a set of rationally arranged propositions is consonant with Dennett's broader outlook on human society. Dennett's model in this book is a version of sociobiology, [7] a method based on the premise that features of human behavior (and, by extension, broader social institutions) have all been produced through natural selection and therefore must have proffered adaptive survival advantage at some point in our evolutionary history. “Hardly anybody would say that the most important thing in life is having more grandchildren than one's rivals do,” he writes, “but this is the default *summum bonum* of every wild animal.” (Dennett: 2006, 5) To generate more offspring, more descendants, is the only mechanism of evolution that Dennett recognizes, the mechanism by which organismic properties are passed down and broadcast through history, across the planet.

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[5] See, for instance, Asad: 1993, Mahmood: 2005, Hirschkind: 2006, Corrigan: 2004, Corrigan: 2008, Vásquez: 2011.

[6] Geertz, of course, is one of the main targets in the seminal first chapter of Asad: 1993, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in which he connects Geertz’s work to a 17th-century European set of debates that constituted religion as a particular kind of object of study, as “a set of propositions to which believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as between different religions and as against natural science” (Asad: 1993, 41) Dennett’s failure to pursue even a single secondary source on the “authorities” he cites suggests a problematic lapse of academic due diligence, one that is made possible by trafficking in a set of common-sense assumptions about religion that circulate in the American context.

[7] Sociobiology as an academic discipline begins with the publication of E.O. Wilson’s book of the same name in 1975, and Richard Dawkins’s near-simultaneous publication of *The Selfish Gene* in 1976. In the 1980s and 1990s, sociobiology gradually transformed into the discipline of evolutionary psychology, which Nathaniel Barrett defines as “*any* program that seeks to understand human cognition and behavior within an evolutionary framework” (Barrett: 2010, 590). I would correct Barrett slightly by specifying that evolutionary psychology is more accurately focused on understanding human cognition through an *adaptationist* evolutionary framework. Barrett is a useful ally for this project, however, in his suggestion that cognitive science of religion (a field on which Dennett also draws in *Breaking the Spell*), would itself benefit from veering away from Dennett’s particular brand of adaptationism. (Barrett: 2010, 590)

Dennett's version of sociobiology focuses on the logic of what he calls, in his earlier *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995), *adaptationism*, a framework that understands evolution as a way of designing solutions to engineering problems. Evolutionary biology, he argues, should "treat the artifact under examination as a product of a process of *reasoned* design development, a series of *choices* among alternatives, in which the *decisions* reached were those *deemed best* by the designers." (Dennett: 1995, 230, emphasis original) In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett recasts this as "the stinginess of Nature," the notion that natural selection never replicates a gene, a feature, a behavior, or a complex combination without paying the "R&D cost" associated with it. The question *cui bono*?—Who benefits?—is the essence of evolutionary inquiry. (Dennett: 2006, 62) How does a given evolutionary modification produce *profit*? How does it confer advantage on organisms that enables them to produce more offspring and thus disseminate their genes? For Dennett, the market forces created by an organism's interactions with its world are severe enough that "nothing can evolve and persist for long in this demanding world unless it somehow provokes its own replication better than the replication of its rivals." (Dennett: 2006, 70) Evolutionary biology, for Dennett, draws out this neatly penciled grid of credits and debits, of outlays and profits. How do coyotes, for instance, recoup the cost of their midnight howling? Biologists will soon have the answer: "Any such pattern of conspicuous outlay demands an accounting." (Dennett: 2006, 57)

"Conspicuous outlays" such as religious ritual, belief, and practice are no exception to this rule of the "accountability" of nature. Since religions do not have particular, identifiable designers—rather taking shape over long periods of time—religions and folk cultures must evolve out of their own artificial marketplace of natural selection. (Dennett: 2006, 81) What comes across in Dennett's theories about religion[8] is the unshakeable *calculability* of religion. Religion is an extension of the fundamentally rational economy that is the history of bodies on earth. *Cui bono*? he asks, again and again. Who benefits? "What pays for religion?" (Dennett: 2006, 70) There's no such thing as a free lunch. For Dennett

"[i]ndividual rational agents, looking out for their own interests and doing their own individual cost-benefit analyses, make the decisions that shape, directly or indirectly, the features of the corporation." (Dennett: 2006, 180)

Religion emerges in the same field of rationally circulating currency that produces bodies, one directly translatable into the economy of exchange of goods, services, and money: it exists to the precise extent that it proffers calculable value. As feminist philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller has suggested, there is a convergence between

[8] In the adaptive category, Dennett mentions the group selection theory, the idea that religion serves to unite human bodies in groups and thus increase survival prospects. "Since people are not like ants but really quite rational," Dennett explains, "they are unlikely to be encouraged to invest heavily in group activities unless they perceive (or think they perceive) benefits worth the investment." (Dennett: 2006, 185) In the exaptive category, Dennett points to, for example, the possibility that we developed a susceptibility to placebo effects in order to enable us to benefit from prescientific medical treatment, such as magical healing. This susceptibility to placebo may have been the opening through which religion entered and infested human culture. (Dennett: 2006, 137)

sociobiological explanations and an American ideology of laissez-faire capitalism: both take their unit of analysis as a rationally self-interested “Hobbesian” organism seeking to accumulate wealth. (Keller: 1991, 87)

This is why Dennett thinks that we should study religion in the first place: we need to “find out why people love their religion, and what it's good for” (Dennett: 2006, 42). For Dennett, the value of religion is fundamentally measurable. Although Dennett knows that much “good” has come out of religion, since there are clearly “bad spells” (a list for which he rounds up the usual suspects of Jim Jones, Aum Shinrikyo, fanatical madrassas, abortion-clinic-bombers), we need a dialogue about good and bad spells, “a clear account of the reasons that can be offered for and against the different visions of the participants.” (Dennett: 2006, 14) Dennett calls for a rendering of accounts; religion must be diagrammed according to a balance sheet of profit and loss.

Dennett makes many strong points in this book. Among them is his assertion that there is an aura of mystique around religion that prevents us from analyzing it critically and, in academic circles, a certain protectionism that shields the humanities from the changing epistemic landscape produced by evolutionary biology. A lingering metaphysical commitment to the absolute divide between *Geistes-* and *Naturwissenschaft* keeps new insights and approaches from the sciences from interspersing with the “pure” speculations of the humanities. Dennett is right that we need to ask questions about religion and science. The question is how. As I will show, Dennett's approach—beholden to a certain contemporary American episteme—is susceptible to a convergent critique: both deconstruction and pluralist approaches from evolutionary biology offer congruent insights into the weaknesses of American New Atheism. Drawing out this critique—which amounts to softening the overwhelming confidence in human reason to make sense of the world—paves the way for new understandings of religion and new modalities of atheism itself.

Encryption: Religion and Deconstruction

“Darwinism cannot be squared with hopes for intrinsic harmony or progress in nature.” - Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda's Thumb*, 13

In this section I want to rehearse what a deconstructive response to Dennett's project in *Breaking the Spell* would look like. There are several trajectories this could follow: as scholars such as Grace Jantzen (1999) and Gavin Hyman (2010) have pointed out, atheism’s subscription to a set of positivist presuppositions about the relationship between religion and reason leaves it susceptible to deconstructive maneuvers that take apart the “metaphysics of presence” underpinning rationalism. I want to focus here on one particular lineage of this critique, running from the early to the late Jacques Derrida and on to his strongest contemporary interpreter in continental philosophy of religion, John D. Caputo. In this strand, religion is incompatible with the suite of calculations proposed by Dennett. Rather than being an appendage of the broader rational economy of bodies, religion is the *incalculable*, outside of pure rational determination, a platform for *accident*. Although this sense of religion as incalculable could be taken as positing a new

essence of religion, I will suggest here that it is best understood as a corrective mitigating the overconfidence in human reason animating American New Atheism—and in this can be brought into conversation with pluralist evolutionary biology.

Derrida's critique of the "metaphysical" approach to religion begins as early as *Of Grammatology* (1967/1974). In this work, Derrida outlines a theory of meaning that relies not on the pure "presence" of systems of meaning, but on their messiness and contamination. Derrida suggests that meaning is produced not through direct, unmediated encounter with a presence, but out of the differential play of *traces*. In constituting an object of experience, that object is contaminated by the *trace* of its other; the borders it draws against what-it-is-not project the shape of the other inside it. The trace, Derrida explains, is the agent of impurity,

"[a]n element without simplicity. An element, whether it is understood as the medium or as the irreducible atom, of the arche-synthesis in general, of what one must forbid oneself to define within the system of oppositions of metaphysics, of what consequently one should not even call *experience* in general, that is to say the origin of *meaning* in general." (Derrida: 1974, 9)

There is "no absolute origin of sense in general," only a structurally indeterminate opening—a susceptibility to chance encounters—out of which meaning emerges. (Derrida: 1974, 65)

It is worth noting that this idea of the trace as the operative feature of meaning, experience, and sense, is, for Derrida, at work in all complex systems, including bodies. Derrida lists genetics, cybernetics, and all forms of intelligence—including the amoeba and human writing—as inscribed within the play of traces. All are part of the fundamental matrix of "arche-writing," a dynamic of inscription that does away with "the myth of the simplicity of origin." (Derrida: 1974, 92) Bodies—and the systems of meaning that orbit them—are all embedded in the play of traces. When philosophy or science tries to comprehend bodies, it must contend with the fundamental instability produced by this multiplicity of influences. This instability does not make philosophy or science impossible, but leads to a recognition that organisms are complex rather than pure and that the study of them will always be contingent. As we will see in the next section, this allowance for the instability of complex systems—rather than the insistence that they remain fundamentally intelligible to human reason—is the operative assumption for contemporary, post-adaptationist evolutionary biology.

The trace complexifies meaning. But what are the ramifications of this complexifying approach to the production of meaning for religion? Derrida turns to this topic in a later essay, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." (1996/2002) Although Derrida is explicitly addressing the topic of religion here, he does not offer a linear argument or program for understanding it. Instead, his essay is structured aphoristically, as a series of 52 "crypts" and later "pomegranates." From the outset, Derrida expressly refuses to permit a unified membrane of meaning to settle over the field of what is designated by the term "religion."

This is why Derrida begins by questioning whether it is even possible to extend "religion" as a category around the globe. He questions the "Latinization" of the world, the wafting of the Latin word "religion" outside of Romance Europe, encircling a heterogeneous array of practices, thoughts, and affects into a single, parochial term. Writing in Roman italics, Derrida asks: "*How then to think—within the limits of reason alone—a religion which, without again becoming 'natural religion,' would today be effectively universal?*" (Derrida: 2002, 53) For Derrida, the category of religion is itself unstable. Attempts to corral it into a single, simplex definition—such as Dennett's "belief in a supernatural agent or agents"—are immediately suspect.

This cryptic term "religion" is further complicated by its inextricable association with the other features of human worlds that enfold it. Could we ever determine, for instance, a war of religion *as such*, Derrida asks? To do so, we would need to isolate religion, "to establish the essential traits of the religious as such from those that establish, for example, the concepts of ethics, of the juridical, of the political or of the economic." (Derrida: 2002, 63) Derrida is skeptical that religion can ever be purged of the traces that surround it—its collisions with the things of the world. The attempt to purify religion, to isolate it like a variable in an equation ("now solve for religion") by subtracting the influences of history, presupposes that there is a thing "religion" out there in the world preceding our Latin word for it. Derrida says that religion is too complicated—too contaminated, too removed from the possibility of a simple origin point—to be abstracted in this way.

But these critical approaches are only part of Derrida's deeper encryption of "religion" as a category. For Derrida, religion does not correspond to a calculable proposition because religion is itself incalculable. From the quiet, scattered, and broken crypts Derrida leads us to another place, "*the most anarchic and anarchivable place possible, not the island nor the Promised Land, but a certain desert, that which makes possible, opens, hollows or infinitizes the other*." (Derrida: 2002, 55) This desert, *chora*, is the locus of religion. Not the locus as the place where it exists, its location, but the *making-place*, the possibility of having a place, spacing itself.

For Derrida, the desert, *chora*, is another trope of the trace. Like the trace, it is a condition of possibility for meaning, the linking-together of phenomena. Like the trace, it is ungraspable, barren, uninhabitable—a thing that makes complexity by permitting collisions between other things. "*It is,*" Derrida writes, "*neither Being, nor the Good, nor God, nor Man, nor History.*" (Derrida: 2002, 59) *Chora* as the place of religion is the place beyond reason, before meaning, inscrutable to calculation. Religion is not shaped by a determinable equation, but by the incalculable forces of meaning prior to calculability: "*abstract spacing*, place itself, *the place of absolute exteriority*" (Derrida: 2002, 57).

This bent, bumpy sense of religion as prior to calculation is further elaborated by John D. Caputo in his commentaries on Derrida's work. In *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997), Caputo suggests that he will try to sketch out an answer to Derrida's bitter lament over his religion "about which nobody understands anything" (*personne ne*

comprends rien) (in: Caputo: 1997, xvii). Derrida's religion, Caputo suggests, is precisely this notion of the incalculable, of the *indeterminable* to-come that is not-yet.

Caputo reads Derrida's desert as the place of ineffable undecidability. Rather than serving as a foundation for truth, the shifting, burning sands of the desert deform meaning, melting it in the too-brilliant sun:

"for Derrida, the trace is the element of undecidability, the formlessness in which determinate forms are inscribed, a desert place within which determinate decisions—theological or atheological—are made, each checked and confused by the other, each movement disturbed by a countermovement, so that we do not know what is taking place; in the desert one never knows whether what is coming is an oasis or a mirage" (Caputo: 1997, 57)

What matters here is the impossibility of total knowledge. Whether this is meant to be taken in an absolute sense—as the repudiation of any "knowledge" about religion—is a question beyond the scope of this essay. What matters for our purposes is that deconstruction offers a way of approaching religion that unsettles the superlative confidence in reason expressed by American New Atheists such as Dennett.

For Caputo, this incalculability is not a way to scuttle religion, but to unshackle it. In Caputo's reading, "[t]he effect of deconstruction is not to undo a specifically religious faith but to resituate it within the trace and thereby to let faith be faith, not knowledge or triumphalism." (Caputo: 1997, 57) Deconstruction, by destabilizing the premises on which meaning is generated—showing that truth, meaning, and knowledge are always shifting and slippery rather than solid—is a move against *totalization*, as much in theology as in atheism. (Caputo: 1997, 19, cf. Caputo: 2013)

All of these warped and jagged openings resonate with one final deconstructive theme that I want to bring to bear on Dennett's project: this is the motif, taken from Catherine Malabou's 2004 collaboration with Derrida, *Counterpath*, of accident. In Malabou's reading of Derrida, deconstruction is fundamentally about the process whereby meaning and truth skid away from their origins, the non-programmability of the world, the exit from absolute control. For Derrida and Malabou, the *counterpath* is the trajectory that skids off the rails. Like the trace, it is impure, impacted by the other. (Derrida & Malabou: 2004, 6)

This counterpath is the path that, rather than being under control, predictable and determined, is subject to *accident*. Accidentality is what makes the production of meaning possible by preventing the eternal repetition of the same. "When drift as deviation happens [*arrive*]," they write, "like some unforeseen catastrophe, it always occurs as an accident befalling an essence" (Malabou & Derrida: 2004, 6).[9] There is a "generalized accidentality" (Derrida & Malabou: 2004, 188) embedded in the heart of meaning and experience. Unpredictable and outside of the order of things, it is the matrix of possibility

[9] This echoes a motif in evolutionary biology: that if there were no accidents at the level of genetic material, there would be no mutation, and therefore no variation of species.

itself. Derrida, expressly linking this trope to religion, identifies it as the moment of "revelation, bedazzlement, conversion." (Derrida & Malabou: 2004, 13)

How would we bring this approach—the deconstructive view of religion—to bear on Dennett's work? Dennett's vision of religion, as we saw, is fundamentally a question of calculation. Religion can be carefully unpacked and arranged on a grid. We start with a definition—a definition deeply indebted to a certain Americanized understanding of religion as an iteration of knowledge—and track religion back to its pure origins in evolutionary time. For Dennett, religion is a metaphysical object, something that can be pulled out of the world and studied, like a hydrogen molecule or the force of gravity. Derrida, by contrast, suggests that "religion" as a word, as a category, is sloppily constituted by the impure play of traces. It has a history, and its meaning must be determined anew each time it is deployed in time and space. (Derrida: 2002, 48) Rather than a specimen, religion is a kaleidoscope of images, forms, technologies, practices, affects, bodies, experiences, *and* beliefs.

Whereas for Dennett, religion is a "puzzle" that can be solved by turning to the rationalizing intuitions of evolutionary theory, for Derrida, religion is a crypt, an uncertainty, an unknown. Bodies are not rational programs—so says Derrida. They are always open to the possibility of the radically unexpected, the fundamentally other that rewrites the delicate wisps of code that hold it together. To be immune to this openness—to be able to actually predict hurricanes or financial crises in advance with perfect clarity—would only leave us trapped in the endless recurrence of the same. Instead of the same, deconstruction tracks a slowly unfurling chaos. Instead of total program, there is accident. Philosophers of religion, by starting with Derrida's insight that religion is contaminable rather than a corrupt form of knowledge, can open up a set of ways of engaging religion and atheism itself that are invisible to the New Atheists.

"Glorious Accidents": Evolution and Embodied History

"If deconstruction were a theory, it would be a theory that nothing is safe, pure, clean, uncontaminated, monochromatic, unambiguous." - John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 225

Applying the deconstructive method to atheism is not itself new. My objective here is to *deepen* this critique by combining it with evolutionary biology, to stage a coalescence between deconstruction and a different approach to Darwinism that challenges the scientistic authority invoked by the New Atheists *and* makes new understandings of religion possible. New Atheism—especially Dennett's American iteration of New Atheism, which, more than that of any of his cohort, tries to muster the authority of science—not only gets religion wrong: it also misrepresents the current state of affairs in evolutionary biology. As neurobiologist Stephen Rose writes,

"[a]mong practising biologists… there is an audible grumbling about why 'we' should give the claims of either Dawkins or Dennett serious consideration. These are, after all, people who either no longer do science or never did it; they are not part of 'our' discourse

of careful experimentation and allied theoretical claim." (Rose: 1998, x)

By turning to the work of George G. Simpson and Stephen Jay Gould, we can see that a more comprehensive evolutionary theory is incompatible with the image of bodies as skillfully designed rational economies that props up Dennett's adaptationist theory of evolution and his atheism. This pluralist critique suggests the possibility of a tactical convergence between deconstruction and evolutionary biology around the theme of *accident*.

American paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson was one of the most prominent evolutionary theorists of the mid-20th century. At first glance, Simpson's work looks like a precursor of adaptationism: he writes at length about the implications of biology for culture, and Dawkins quotes one of his most famous lines in the opening chapter of *The Selfish Gene*. (Dawkins: 1976, 1) But this would be a misunderstanding of Simpson's overall project, which is at variance with Dennett's understanding of evolutionary biology as a way of unpacking nature's engineering decisions. In his volume of essays, *Biology and Man* (1969), Simpson asks a question: is biology a science like any other science? On the one hand, Simpson replies in the affirmative: biology is an investigation of the natural world relying on the same scientific principles as the other natural sciences. Simpson even suggests, with characteristic aplomb, that biology has now replaced math as "queen of the sciences." (Simpson: 1969, vii).

But Simpson is also careful to define biology as distinct from other physical sciences. He identifies several internal horizons that establish biology as unique. First, the different scales of complexity between the "nonliving systems" examined by physicists and chemists and the living organisms studied by biologists yield qualitatively different methodologies. In the laboratory, the physical scientist's objects of study can be rendered even simpler, their variations pristinely isolated. Biology's materials are something else entirely: "[t]he very simplest living organisms… are enormously more complex than any inorganic system." (Simpson: 1969, 7) A single cell (especially a eukaryotic cell), the starting point of biology, exceeds a molecule in complexity by several orders of magnitude. Simpson suggests that this understanding can even recover a certain version of vitalism, the belief in a "vital, nonmaterial element" unique to organisms: vitality is *organization*, hypercomplexity itself, and it is this unique element that sets biology apart from allied sciences. (Simpson: 1969, 7)

Second, Simpson points out that the physical sciences are "typological and idealistic" (Simpson: 1969, 8). Atoms, for instance, are described as examples of a type, not as individual things. But where an indifference to variation is entirely appropriate to those fields of science, in biology, typologies are always imperfect: organisms "are individuals," Simpson writes, "and no two are ever likely to be exactly alike." (Simpson: 1969, 9) Biology fixates on the textures of variation between organisms even at the micro-level. Biology as a field would not exist without this fundamental intimacy with transformation, complexity, and the play of differences.

Dennett's likening of the study of religion to the study of economies or weather patterns

is thus shown to be a critical error. Biology takes organisms as its object of study—organisms that exist in a categorically different realm of complexity from the mathematical equations, precise laboratory conditions, and well-calibrated instruments that underpin research in other fields. Bodies—organisms—and the religious worlds they produce are not so easily explained: they work in a multidimensional field of complexity. Where Dennett's work celebrates the simplifying power of reason, Simpson's writing resonates in a much more difficult key: the rolling, noisy explosion of organismic complexity. To suggest that the world of living organisms is best understood as a repertoire of well-executed designs is a mistake.

Simpson's line of argument sets the stage for a major debate in the 1970s and 1980s in the field of evolutionary biology, the controversy between adaptationists (such as John Maynard Smith, Richard Dawkins, and Dennett[10]) and "pluralists." This controversy tracks closely with the career of one particular evolutionary theorist, who I think should be of much interest to deconstructionists and philosophers of religion, the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould.

As far back as the late 1970s, in a famous paper published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, Gould and his collaborator Richard Lewontin laid out a critique of what they called the "Panglossian paradigm" underpinning adaptationism. This paradigm (Pangloss[11] is a character in Voltaire's *Candide* who believed that every feature of the world could be explained according to its rational function in "the best of all possible worlds") insists on making every aspect of an organism assimilable to a streamlined and harmoniously integrated system of functions. Gould and Lewontin call instead for "a pluralistic approach," which could "put organisms, with all their recalcitrant, yet intelligible, complexity, back into evolutionary theory." (Gould & Lewontin: 1979, 597) The pluralist approach understands biological systems along Simpsonian lines—as first and foremost marked by their complexity—and underlines that this complexity may exceed a simple rational account of "what is this for?"[12] What Gould and Lewontin classify as "spandrels"—architectural elements that emerge as accidental byproducts of other structural features—in biological organisms are examples of

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[10] See Dennett: 1995, Ch. 9

[11] From a Greek word meaning "talkative," suggesting someone who has an answer for everything.

[12] Interestingly, Gould & Lewontin's alternative methodologies—such as the attention to morphology and *Bauplanë*, the structural constraints that emerge through the evolution of organisms's body plans—are devised in part through a turn to continental Europe, where "evolutionists have never been much attracted to the Anglo-American penchant for atomizing organisms into parts and trying to explain each as a direct adaptation." (Gould & Lewontin: 1979, 593) In a later edited volume devoted to Gould's work, *Understanding Scientific Prose* (1993), Deborah Journet suggests that "Spandrels" can be understood as a form of deconstruction, as a critique of adaptationism as an "almost universally applicable cause-and-effect argument [of] monistic and homogeneous explanation—a kind of master narrative—for evolutionary change. Moreover," she continues, adaptationism "provides a foundational system or metaphysics by which virtually all organic phenomena can be given meaning through a teleological vision of the evolutionary process as goal-directed and progressive." (Journet: 1993, 240) Gould & Lewontin's pluralism thus parallels deconstruction's challenging of traditional metaphysics. Gould, for his part, in the same volume, writes of deconstruction: "I'll be damned if I have ever been able to penetrate this movement, although twenty people have tried to explain it to me. If I ever comprehend Derrida, who knows—I might even be ready for *Finnegan's Wake*." (Gould: 1993, 327)

evolution unfolding through chance, rather than through a reasoned profit motive.

This emphasis on biological complexity is echoed in Gould's work on the patterns of evolution. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was based on a convergence of two fields of study in Darwin's own work as a naturalist: Thomas Malthus's early 19th century theory of cyclical, self-regulating population dynamics, and Charles Lyell's contemporaneous theory of "uniformitarianism," the idea, in geology, that natural processes shape the earth in even, consistent patterns. Darwin applied these frames to the study of organisms, yielding the theory of evolution by natural selection, the idea that differential reproduction gradually transformed organismic lineages by steadily adapting them to their local environments.

This model was dominant in the biological sciences for a century—and still holds currency as a popular misconception of the state of evolutionary theory today. But in the 1970s, Gould and his colleague Niles Eldredge, trained paleontologists who had studied both the fossil record and geological processes, proposed an alternative to this "gradualist" model. Based on the fossil record, Gould identified several flaws in the gradualist hypothesis: long periods of evolutionary stasis punctuated by the sudden appearance of large numbers of species, and an absence of the "pattern of gradual and sequential advance in organization" that the orthodox Darwinian model would have predicted. (Gould: 1980, 139, 182) The new theory, *punctuated equilibrium*, suggested that organisms evolved at the macro-level in sharp zigzags rather than steady arcs. Gould's punctuated equilibrium approach was labeled by its detractors "evolution by jerks;" he responded in kind, dubbing the gradualist model "evolution by creeps."

Gradualism takes as its model Lyell's image of a landscape modified by erosion: wind gradually carves buttes in the badlands, waves grind down cliffs where the ocean meets continents, rivers steadily widen their banks. Punctuated equilibrium invokes a plurality of geological processes: in addition to erosion, glaciers crash through and cleave biomes into multiple parts; temperature changes and heavy weather patterns harden or wash away landforms and vegetation; volcanoes erupt, earthquakes crack the earth, continental plates collide. Populations migrate or die out and new lifeforms step into the ecological niches created by their absence—in the process recursively reconfiguring the landscape itself. These multilateral and multilevel processes by which biomes are produced and organismic populations are divided are, for Gould, the major progenitors of macro-level evolutionary change. Gould writes that "we must reckon with a multiplicity of mechanisms." (Gould: 1980, 16)

Darwin's creationist opponents saw all species as unaltered from their original formations. Darwin, Gould points out, did not refute them by looking for the marvels of evolution—the thoughtfully composed or ingeniously adapted functions, the specimens of meticulous reason. Rather, he "searched for oddities and imperfections.... [knowing that] you cannot demonstrate evolution with perfection because perfection need not have a history." (Gould: 1980, 28) Darwin realized early on that "ideal design is a lousy argument for evolution, for it mimics the postulated action of an omnipotent creator." The real proof of evolution lies in "[o]dd arrangements and funny solutions... paths that a

sensible God would never tread but that a natural process, constrained by history, follows perforce" (Gould: 1980, 20f) Instances of rational organization—what Dennett calls "design"—in nature may be products of evolution, but they are only part of a broader biological landscape that often indicates the *senseless* unfurling of evolutionary processes.

Darwin saw how bodies were put together by the *imprecise*, imperfect buffets of nature, not with jeweler's precision. Features of bodies could become redundant and then emerge into an entirely new functional order. As they emerged, they could combine and recombine in unexpected ways, producing helpful, harmful, or neutral results. Gould's eponymous example in his anthology *The Panda's Thumb* (1980) is the sesamoid thumb of the giant panda. Giant pandas use their "thumb" to strip bamboo. But this thumb is not a true thumb; it is an outgrowth of a sesamoid bone near the hand. It is a clumsy "contraption," a set of phenotypic potentials embedded deep within the panda's genome and activated by "a simple genetic change, perhaps a single mutation affecting the timing and rate of growth" (Gould: 1980, 23), which, in the context of the panda's *current* environment, became a part of the organism's survival strategy, facilitating the senseless outcome of a herbivorous species within the order *carnivora*. The sesamoid thumb is an *exaptive* change: "an organ built under the influence of selection for a specific role may be able, as a consequence of its structure, to perform many other, unselected functions as well." (Gould: 1980, 50, cf. Gould & Vrba: 1982)

What does this mean for evolution? It suggests that rather than "a divine artificer," nature is "an excellent tinkerer": "The sesamoid thumb wins no prize in an engineer's derby," Gould writes. "It is… a contraption, not a lovely contrivance." (Gould: 1980, 24) Rather than viewing evolution, as Dennett does, as a machinic complex of skillfully resolved design problems—a rational economy—Darwinian theory, in Gould's telling, is fundamentally *ad hoc*, a series of blind moves executed in haste—a garage sale of bodies, organs, genes found on the scrap heap, not a sculpture garden.

The fundamental shift that this emphasis on history and multiplicity effects is to see bodies themselves as fundamentally complex or jagged rather than smooth. A gradualist model suggests a singular *economy of force*, a steady and efficient pressure producing better and better organisms. Smooth, like a rock worn away by sand. The punctuated equilibrium is clunky, complicated, multidimensional. Different forces act on organisms at different times and with different effects. Organs and bodily potentials accumulate and interact in new ways. These interactions are best understood as *accidental*, as the inevitable collisions within any constantly mobile field of forces, collisions that produce new relations. (Gould: 1980, 140)

This theme of accidentality becomes central in Gould's later work, particularly his 1996 monograph *Full House*. Here, Gould articulates a radical new critique of the evolutionary model of progress, suggesting that rather than viewing evolution in terms of an innate mechanism installed in organisms inclining us towards rational improvement we see evolution in terms of *chance*, the chaotic pulses of nature inscribed within bodies in the genomic medium. Pluralism de-emphasizes the analytics of design—the engineer's

rational arrangement of bodies and organs—and asks us to consider instead the multiple planes of force (including natural selection) pushing organisms in accidental directions.

Gould thus asks us to consider a common image in 20th century biology textbooks: the trajectory of the history of life from "The Age of Bacteria" to "The Age of Invertebrates" to "Fishes" to "Dinosaurs" to "Mammals" to "Humans." Gould argues that this visual account is a misrepresentation of how evolution operates, one that expresses a misconception: evolution, he argues, is not the same as progress. Gould asks what the "success stories" of, for instance, mammalian evolution would be. "We can answer this question without ambiguity," he responds, "at least in terms of numerous species and vigorous radiation: rats, bats, and antelopes… These three groups dominate the world of mammals, both in numbers and in ecological spread." (Gould: 1996, 30) But the Age of Bats doesn't get a picture in the textbooks, "[w]e never feature these groups because we do not know how to draw their triumph. Evolution, to us, is a linear series of creatures getting bigger, fancier, or at least better adapted to local environments." (Gould: 1996, 63f) Evolution, Gould reminds us, does not unfold successively or even dialectically, with new species wiping out or absorbing previous species. Rather, it unfurls in many directions and dimensions all at once. The human race is only a "twig" on this many-branching bush. Calling our present time the "Age of Humans" is like calling the history of the United States after 1959 the "Age of Alaska," naming a broad, complex system—a full house—after a recent appendage.

Following Darwin, Gould reminds us that "improvement" in any given species is always inextricably tied to local conditions. But the word "evolution," in scientific and popular frames, has been made into a false synonym of "progress," stripped from context, denoting a transcendent register of rational improvement rather than "adaptation to changing local environments." (Gould: 1996, 139) And, as Gould points out, since "[t]he sequence of local environments in any one place should be effectively random through geological time" any evolutionary trajectory that is "tracking local environments by natural selection... should be effectively random as well." (Gould: 1996, 140) This is why "[t]he vaunted progress of life is really *random motion away from simple beginnings,* not *directed impetus toward inherently advantageous complexity*." (Gould: 1996, 173, emphasis original) At the heart of evolution sits, rather than a sharp-eyed designer, the slow, random pull of natural forces.

Gould's overarching thesis in *Full House* is that even though humans span the globe and have produced unprecedented terrestrial creations, this age, and all ages in the history of life on earth, are and have been the *Age of Bacteria*. To illustrate this theory, Gould sketches a bell curve. The bell curve expresses Gaussian (normal) distribution: in a system with one axis and random distribution, the bell curve will register the mode—the most frequently occurring characteristic—of the system as well as its outliers. The left tail shows the outliers in one direction, the right tail the outliers in the other. Gould conjectures a bell curve that plots the sophistication and complexity of the genetic code of all life on earth against population levels. The most populous organisms would be at the apex of the bell curve. The least complex and least frequently occurring degree of complexity would be at the left tail. The most complex and least frequently occurring

degree of complexity would be at the right tail.

But Gould argues that the distribution of population over complexity is actually only *half* of a bell curve, because the left portion of the curve is cut off by a "wall" of minimal organismal complexity. In the present evolutionary moment, bacteria are the apex of the half-bell-curve. They are the least complex organisms (you can't get a living organism any less complex than a prokaryotic cell), but *by far the most numerous*. More complicated creatures (all vertebrates, for instance) live way down in the boondocks of the right tail: highly complex, highly infrequent organisms. Any one mammalian body plays host to more bacteria than there are humans on earth. Gradually, in deep time, the right tail of the curve creeps out, producing invertebrates, then vertebrates, including us—complex organisms still overwhelmingly outnumbered by our bacterial predecessors. Bacteria are and have been always "life's constant paradigm of success." (Gould: 1996, 171)

What matters for Gould's purposes is that the bell curve is a depiction of stochastic variation inside a system. The extension of the right tail is "a consequence of *entirely random movement* among all items within the system." (Gould: 1996, 149, emphasis original) Take body size, for instance: "Size increase… is really *random evolution away from small size, not directed evolution toward large size*." (Gould: 1996, 162, emphasis original) The right tail, where we live, is not a trend-line dominating an entire system, any more than the next state after Alaska would be the north pole or Siberia. It is only a function of *random* distribution inside a system. The upshot of this, for Gould, is that the biological sense of "evolution" must be forever uncoupled from the notion of orderly, rational progress. "Claims for progress," Gould asserts, "represent a quintessential example of conventional thinking about trends as entities on the move." (Gould: 1996, 146) Rather than the pinnacle of creation, we are a pointy offshoot; rather than the crowning destiny of a program of design, we are "glorious accidents of an unpredictable process with no drive to complexity" (Gould: 1996, 216).

In short, as Gould suggests in his magnum opus, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, published in 2002 shortly before his death, there is a need to root out the aura of positivism still lingering within evolutionary theory, a "reconsideration of major evolutionary concepts that still bear the originating stamp of a Victorian scientific context strongly committed to unidirectional, single-level and deterministic views of natural causality" (Gould: 2002, 30). In their place, Gould wants to recommit us to thinking Simpson's emphasis on the extraordinary complexity of biological systems—a complexity that exceeds the rendering of two-dimensional balance sheets, a complexity that can register the unpredictable force of randomness, of accident.[13]

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[13] Dennett, of course, has his own response to Gould, outlined in chapters nine and ten of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. It is beyond my domain to decisively resolve this dispute, only wishing here to point to ways that deconstructive and pluralist evolutionary approaches can be brought into dialog to reshape conversations in American atheism. It is worth noting, however, that in an otherwise admirably thoughtful and measured book, Dennett's argument against Gould seems to have the shape of a frenzy of protests rather than a programmatic critique: Gould's work is accused of being simultaneously a) not-revolutionary, obvious, co-opted, pedestrian, and b) wrong, inaccurate, deluded, dangerous, unscientific. The gravamen of Dennett's attack—that Gould is looking for "skyhooks" that will help restore a measure of human

Dennett's notion of human bodies—and our most complex outputs, such as religion—as fundamentally calculable are incoherent according to this vision. Rather than being the product of a rational economy in which all accounts are settled and balanced, in which "some differential replication [pays] for the R&D responsible for [every] design" (Dennett: 2006, 92), bodies, all complex organisms, are constituted by noise in the system, the ragged echoes of natural forces crashing in slow-motion across the planet. This does not mean that science and religion cannot be put in conversation, or that we must grant all religious claims (inasmuch as religion makes claims, which seems to me to be the right tail of the bell curve of what religion does) immunity from science. But to impose a rational *accounting* on religion, to punch the buttons of our calculators or finger an abacus of black and white beads, is fundamentally the wrong approach. Religions, like bodies, are complex systems that are only unevenly affected by the streamlining force of the profit motive. Both are also constituted within high-impact regimes of accident.

Conclusion: Post-Atheism: Deconstruction and Evolution

"...misfirings, Darwinian mistakes: blessed, precious mistakes." - Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 252

The title of this paper comes from another New Atheist text, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2004). Dawkins is also at odds with Gould, and would certainly take issue with some of my assertions about biological science here. But Dawkins's approach to atheism is significantly more interesting than Dennett's. Where *Breaking the Spell* is a clunking, mechanical book, Dawkins's approach in *God Delusion* is, in its way, celebratory, cinematic, a Monty Python viewing party, with a touch of the sadistic glee of the schoolyard bully and a healthy dose of 007-ish insouciance. It is a carnivalesque book, splashing around in its reader's affects even as it pays lip service to rational argument. Dawkins, I think, has a better feel for the texture and complexity of bodies, reason, and religion—for all the immeasurable things that motivate us.

Reading their atheism manuals side by side throws into relief Dennett's role as a philosopher with training in artificial intelligence and engineering, who fundamentally sees evolution—and religion—as a design problem a with rational solution. Dennett's approach postulates a rigid economy of bodies and systems of meaning around them that can be *accounted for*. It is a system of calculators, a compression of all the complexity of bodies into a flat, rationally organized economy. He is a sort of modern day brass

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responsibility to the evolutionary picture by shifting focus away from the clockwork mechanisms that produced human bodies—seems to me baseless. (Dennett: 1995, 298) Ultimately, as Gould points out in his review/rejoinder to Dennett in the *New York Review of Books*, although Dennett "explains the strict adaptationist view well enough… he defends a miserly and blinkered picture of evolution in *assuming that all important phenomena* can be explained thereby." (Gould: 1997, my emphasis) Gould's pluralist model, *mutatis mutandis*, is the preferred model among practicing biologists. Recent reviews (see Barrett & Hoekstra: 2011 on molecular spandrels and Jablonski: 2008 on multi-level selection), textbooks (see Ridley: 2004, Chs. 7 & 10, Ruse: 2009, Chs. 11-12), and even popular accounts (see Dobbs: 2013, Fodor: 2007) endorse versions of pluralism over the inflexible adaptationism championed by Dennett.

instrument psychologist, a descendant of the phrenologists who believed that precise measurements would yield all the answers to complex questions of biology and behavior. In Dennett's world, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Nothing is left to chance. Nothing worth studying is by accident. Only rational design matters.

Evolutionary biology is a hard science, rigorous and conscientious. But like all good science, it knows its limits. Simpson shows us that biology has a complex object of study—life, a sprawling, messy project that spins off something completely new every minute of every day—that cannot be rendered according to the same simple formulae as, for instance, chemistry. For Gould, then, bodies and their weird evolutionary histories are not streamlined, well-oiled machines: they are messy, complicated, multidimensional. Dennett's smooth, singular economy, instantly rendered transparent by the magic question, *cui bono*?, is unworkable on this terrain.

Bodies are broken. For Derrida, religion is a way of naming this brokenness, a weathered label for the complex, incalculable, undecidable trace that is the condition of all meaning. For Caputo, bodies are wounded, ineffably inscribed in a world of contingency and uncertainty. "But," he reassures us,

"these are the strangest sort of wounds, made up of cuts that cut us loose from the vanities of the superficial life and bring us face to face with the complexity and perplexity of life, with life's darkest center. That perplexity is what gives life beauty and depth, passion and power, even while it decenters us, knocks us off our pins, robs us of the ease with which we negotiate the rapids of everyday life, divesting us of the sense that we have everything in control." (Caputo: 2006, 73)

Rather than a machine for producing truth, the deconstructive approach views religion as complex, passionate, embodied, and affective. This does not place it beyond the realm of study or understanding, but inculcates in its observers a methodological humility that suggests that rationality alone may not be sufficient to capture it—and inclines us to look for ways that religion is shaped and pulled by forces other than reason.

As feminist philosopher of science Elizabeth Grosz points out in *Becoming Undone* (2011), the Darwinian vocabulary for examining the transformation of material bodies—the assignation of a varied, multilateral history to language, thought, consciousness, and reason itself—is "precisely what Derrida has searched for as a language beyond logocentrism, a language that is trace in all its complexity." (Grosz: 2011, 14)[14] Together, the deconstructive and evolutionary methods produce a particular hermeneutic frame for understanding religion. In this frame, religion is not an originary idea or program that has been handed down to us. It is a network of accidents rather than a top-down computer program. Religion is not a solution to our problems, but, rather, a wound, a yearning—the result of an accident.

[14] Although Grosz is the most accomplished reader of the intersection between Derrida and Darwin, her work does not, to my knowledge, engage with Gould or the deeper methodological debates around pluralism in contemporary evolutionary biology.

This is why Emergent Church author Peter Rollins has accused the New Atheists of "not going far enough" in their attack on faith. They should attack not just belief, he says, but the need for belief, the need for certainty, the fantasy of order and wholeness in all its forms. Rollins wants to push the understanding of religion beyond a particular American orientation—a white, Protestant, scientistic representation of religion as belief—toward a space where this woundedness is *felt* most acutely, where the startling accident of bodies is put on full display. "This," Rollins writes, "is the community of nobodies and nothings." (Rollins: 2010) In this approach, religion is the crystallization of accidentality. Evolutionary biology can add to deconstruction a radical attention to bodies, pulling deconstructive motifs such as *chora* out of the realm of abstraction. Deconstruction, in turn, elaborates the fundamental insights of Darwin, helping translate Darwin's absorption of accident into a set of questions for the humanities that do not rely on positivist overconfidence in rational economies.

This opens up the possibility not only of new ways of being religious, but of new, postsecular atheisms. Postsecular atheisms, or what might be called post-atheisms, refuse the positivism of the American New Atheists and look instead for new practices of what philosopher of religion Donovan O. Schaefer has called "embodied disbelief." (Schaefer: 2013) This can be seen in the work of queer atheist interfaith activist Chris Stedman, who talks in his memoir *Faitheist* (2012) about the experience of being denounced at an atheist gathering for being insufficiently critical of religious beliefs. "Sitting in [a religion] class the day after my botched attempt at seeking secular community," he writes,

"I realized that I felt more at home with my religious colleagues than with the atheists from the day before. I looked around the room, focusing on each individual face; here were people who believed in a God I had theorized away years ago, yet they felt more like kin than most atheists I knew." (Stedman: 2012, 5)

Where does Stedman feel at home? It is not (necessarily) among those with whom he shares intellectual common ground; home is shaped by another set of commonalities linking bodies *outside* the determinations of rationality. Stedman's is a pluralistic understanding in which *reason is not the only thing that counts*. Post-atheism emerges in the wake of the disruption of the positivist overconfidence that religion can be disbanded under the pressure of a fine-tuned rational critique. By insisting that the artifacts of evolution are rational and that religion is a corrupt form of rationality, Dennett and other American New Atheists remain stuck in an unproductive atheism of calculators.

Deconstruction and the life sciences share an unseen family lineage, a history running back to Nietzsche, writing in the aftermath of Darwin and for the first time in modern philosophy reflecting on the possibility that the human being is an animal. His conclusion was that we must abandon the metaphysical determinations that had dominated philosophy up until that point—reason, order, Truth. Meanwhile, the Darwinian revolution remains incomplete even among the popularizers of Darwin, many of whom still inscribe his radical discovery inside a simplistic positivist petri dish made up of "rational economies" and "accounts." Taking evolutionary biology and deconstruction

together allows us to move past this perspective, to grind a new interdisciplinary lens, one that casts light on the excess of nature, the unreasonable gifts of nature, our bodies, blessed, precious mistakes.

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